Critical Omissions. How the Street Children Studies Could Address Self-Destructive Agency

Roy Gigengack

Introduction
This chapter makes a plea for researching street children with ethnographic depth and vision. With the former I refer to the detailed and longitudinal fieldwork of street ethnography, and with the latter I mean a vision of how street children relate to society. There is room for the street-ethnographic vision, I argue, if it is seen in contradistinction to the two main discourses current in the literature. These two types of discourse, the institutional and the critical/activist, are discussed, and through a series of five statements I suggest how street ethnography can offer a different and a better perspective. My central argument is that research on street children must pay attention to the paradoxes of self-destructive agency inherent in street children’s lives. This critical issue is often omitted in the literature whereas, during my own research in Mexico City, the young street people organised their daily survival around the acquisition and consumption of glues and solvents. These substances also marked their symbolic and olfactory boundaries (Gigengack 2006a: 185-99). Time and again the young street people expressed consciousness of the destruction that was going on, and they often acknowledged that they themselves took an active part in it (ibid.: 337-367). The longitudinal time frame of my research enabled me to see that most street youths do not die spectacularly. They rather perish, and die as young adults from inhalant-related sudden sniffing deaths.

Here then the term street ethnography refers to the detailed examination of the lives and deaths of young and older street people. It seeks to reconstruct the perspectives of the people under study through integrating description, interpretation, and diagnosis. On the one hand it illuminates what the young street people see as their world, how they experience their position in society and react upon it, and on the other, it clarifies how these meanings and experiences are structured through the power relations of the political economy.
The term street ethnography also refers to an established research tradition (Weppner 1977; Gigengack et al. 2000). The fact that I put street ethnography so central in research with street children suggests a willingness to build upon the insights developed in that research tradition, as well as a sensibility to be cautioned by its shortcomings. This stands in contrast to most street children research, which rarely takes inspiration from this literature. Most street children research typically remains within the limits of the sociology of childhood so that, as I go on to show, it seems to be an unwritten rule that the ‘deconstruction of childhood’ should always precede analysis of street children’s lives. It can be speculated, in line with the argument of this chapter, that this intellectual one-sidedness trivializes street children’s lives in respect of behaviours such as inhalant use.

The argument presented below springs from my fieldwork experiences with young street people carried out in Mexico City between 1990 and 1997, amounting to more than 30 months, and several follow-up visits. These experiences confronted me with a big discrepancy: whereas self-destructive drug use was central in the lives and the deaths of the young street people that I had known throughout the years, that specific form of agency was hardly ever dealt with in the street children literature in any serious way. This chapter tries to reconstruct how this scholastic failure occurred on such a paradigmatic scale and also to offer an alternative vision.

This is also a reflexive account. My own early work, too, failed to take into account the self-destruction that was occurring under my nose. It took me years of fieldwork and writing to understand that the young street people’s inhalant use was a form of self-destruction and not a survival strategy. It was only when I began to dream about the sniffing youngsters that I realized that in their inhalant use a larger issue was at stake. This chapter is thus also an admission that I, too, was able to misinterpret, and even overlook, what should have been obvious to me.

**Street children in institutional discourse**

The first type of discourse in relation to which street ethnography must position itself is the institutional. In its most pronounced form, the institutional discourse is produced through the bureaucracies of child care, such as UNICEF, the ILO, and the many state and non-governmental organisations that target street children. Institutional language, however, is not the privilege of institutes; journalists and scholars may use it as well. Key terms often reveal the institutional character of the discourse. A text may state, for example, that it is
'policy oriented' or in search of ‘solutions’ for ‘the problem of street children.’

Institutional categories are widely accepted within street children research and while well-known distinctions, such as children ‘on’ and ‘of’ the street, can be practical in research, they are only valuable if the tenuous relations between child care and social science are acknowledged. In the hands of social workers, policy makers and other experts, the categorisation of some children as ‘street children’ is a way to segregate particular young people for purposes of interventions and/or the distribution of funds. Following Bauman (1998: 106-7), the categories of these professionals are meant to reduce the variance of persons and cases, and therefore to permit disregard for social diversity. Instead, typification replaces the documentation of individual qualities and personal circumstances. In other words, the categories of expertise are, and indeed need to be, estranged from the reality of the streets.

In fact, ‘the street child’ is a good example of a concept that is not well informed by street children’s everyday lives. Institutional sources have abundantly documented that ‘the street child’ is usually a male; that he comes from poor and often female-headed households; that he runs away from child abuse in the home towards drug abuse in the street; and that he lives under the most abhorrent circumstances. As Whyte (1993 [1943]: xv) pointed out decades ago, there is nothing wrong with this sort of generalising statements, except that there are no human beings in it.

The street child experts working in institutional care settings imagine for themselves a singular street child and take his miserable, meaningless existence as representative of all street children. Thus, each institution holds its own defining characteristics of the ‘street child’. The United Nations’ official definition of ‘the street child or street youth’ is, for example, ‘any minor for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode and who is without adequate protection’ (cited in Agnelli 1986: 32). This definition is not designed for the interpretation of street children’s lives and deaths. It is rather an institutional tool designed to help street children’s helpers in their work. Social scientists must therefore interrogate concepts such as ‘the street child’, and interpret them as part of an institutional, rather than a social-scientific, vernacular.

Institutional discourses are for example underpinned by an inherently bureaucratic logic. The unspecified misery of ‘the street child’
prescribes what in institutional jargon is called ‘action’, and ‘action’ is what the bureaucracies of child care undertake. Thus, the singularity in the conceptualisation of ‘the street child’ fits the agenda of institutional survival, since taking ‘action’ in the life of an individual is technically more feasible than intervention in a group.

From a street-ethnographic perspective, however, the notion of ‘the street child’ is problematic. One reason for this is its underlying essentialism. As in the UN definition, ‘the street child’ is usually depicted as homeless and without a family, and while these troubles are certainly relevant for a number of street children, they are not for all of them. A related problem is that definitions that spell out what street children do not have inevitably lump them together with other categories of people. Being homeless or living without a family may, after all, be as characteristic for non-street children as they are for street children.

A further recurrent element of institutional discourse is what Ennew and Milne (1989) characterise as the ‘Number Game’ - the rhetoric about millions of street children. Big numbers were especially popular during the 1980s and 1990s, when street children were still high on the policy agenda. For example, in that period the Dutch Minister of Development Co-operation believed that

‘some eight million children are estimated to live on the streets of Brazil, attempting to scrape a living by doing odd jobs, and by begging, stealing and prostitution. The total number of street children in the whole of Latin America is estimated to be in the region of eighty to hundred million.’ (Pronk 1992: 8)

In the Minister’s discourse, as in others, such high numbers had a function, since they added weight to the necessity of intervention. The Minister proclaimed that there should be more aid for the children of the poor, and the millions of street children served as a vehicle to express such commitment. The Pronk quote was also typical in that the source of the estimation was not mentioned. It is unclear to whom the term ‘street children’ actually refers, however, and it is in any case unlikely that the same criteria had been used to calculate the number for Brazil and the total number for Latin America. Later sources reproduced the cliché of the millions further by uncritically referring to the Minister’s estimations (e.g. Schrijvers 1993: 20).

This focus on large numbers is detrimental as it renders the existence of young street people incomprehensible – with such dimensions it becomes practically impossible to obtain detailed knowledge of
concrete situations and stories. And indeed, this lack of knowledge is reflected in the other clichés operating in institutional discourse. Particular phrases come back time and again in the institutional texts – ‘the street child has no identity’ or ‘the street child sleeps wherever the night catches him’. As a first statement, then, I would argue that street ethnography cannot be based on institutional discourse. The fieldworker's prime task is to avoid thinking institutionally – and that is particularly difficult in the case of street children, for their needs and suffering are so obvious that, in thinking about them, one easily reverts to clichés.

The point is, of course, that the clichés and the other thought categories of institutional discourse tell more about the professionals involved with street children than about the street children themselves. Spradley's labelling theory (1970: 68) comes to mind here. Institutional discourse enables the average professional person to account for what appears to be strange and irrational. Young people living in groups, staying in wastelands and sniffing solvents a good deal are difficult to comprehend. Defining such kids as 'abandoned children’ or ‘children of the street’ enables the expert to relate to them: he or she knows that these youngsters must be pitied, saved, and on occasion ignored. To paraphrase Bauman (1998: 106-7), the estrangement expressed through such categories is the core function of professional distance.

**The activist critique**
The second type of discourse against which street ethnography positions itself is the activist critique. This discourse is as well closely related to the institutions for street children, since its primary target is institutional praxis. Patently, the value of activist critique lies in scandalising certain practices of intervention and condemning the omission of other practices. But the street children’s activists often shift the target of their critique to the institutional discourse. Their underlying idea seems to be that just being critical helps the cause of street children.¹

Typically, critical street children discourse consists of both scholastic and activist components. It enjoys a scientific overlay that the institutional discourse lacks and, on occasions, the activist critique is theoretical. The language often includes particular buzz words such as ‘deconstruction’ and ‘social construct’ – indeed deconstructionism is common call raised in the activist critique offered by street children researchers. Thus, just as I argued above that street ethnography must challenge the institutional discourse so too must it engage in debate with the activist critique. For the danger of radical
deconstructionism is that it may signify, and legitimise, an intellectual 
retreat from the destruction taking place in the margin (Bourgois 

Writers within the activist/ critical discourse often assume that they 
understand *a priori* what transformations are needed to ameliorate 
street children’s lives (Guba *et al.* 1994: 113). Nieuwenhuys, for 
example, is convinced that the poor are helped by ‘critical distance’, 
and she believes that ‘the best way of helping the children of the 
urban poor to gain a sense of worth is by exposing the representations 
that negate what is valuable in their lives’ (1999: 35). Advocates of 
street children like to pose as the destroyers of myths. Ennew (1986, 
1994a: 175) and Aptekar (1988), for example, argue for the need to 
separate ‘fact’ from ‘fiction’ and while there is nothing wrong with that, 
when they praise one another for their myth-breaking capacities, the 
myth that critical scholars can unmask the myths about street 
children starts to lead its own life. And in the substitution of new 
myths for old ones, the activist critique can overshoot its mark. Examples of the flaws of the critical toolkit are concepts such as ‘survival’ and ‘coping strategies’ being used to describe children 
engaging in inhalant use and self-mutilation; ‘pseudo-families’ and 
‘supportive networks’ to depict gangs in which distrust and even rape 
are known to occur; and ‘meaningful relationships’ and ‘capabilities’ 
being held to characterise street children’s life-worlds which are often 
also marked by indifference and idleness.

The romanticism inherent in much activist critique touches upon 
multiple and very complex dimensions, and here I can only trace some 
of its intellectual history. The influential volume edited by James and 
Prout (1997 [1990]) merits special attention, since it provided the 
activist critique with an intellectual underpinning stemming from the 
sociology of childhood. At the time, James and Prout presented the 
‘emergent paradigm’ as a set of ‘dissenting voices’ and a ‘challenge of 
orthodoxy’, and although by now it has become the dominant, if not 
orthodox, approach in the study of childhood, in street children 
studies, these new conceptualizations gave rise to a radical 
deconstructionism (e.g. the volume edited by Connelly and Ennew 
(1996a)).

The new paradigm stipulated that ‘children must be seen as actively 
involved in the construction of their own social lives’ and suggested 
that childhood be analysed by a focus on ‘the present, ongoing social 
lives of children rather than their past or future’ as had hitherto been 
most often the case (James *et al.* 1997: 4-5). Applied to street children 
studies, however, these prescriptions lead to approaches in which the
successful, rather than the flawed, day-to-day survival becomes central. What is problematic is not that street children are seen as actors; rather that in such studies the underlying idea of agency is an unreflexively positive one. The retreat into the present further facilitates overlooking the self-destructive aspects of street children’s agency: only through a shrunken time frame can persistent inhalant use be interpreted as a coping mechanism, and its consequences be ignored.

Another problem of applying the paradigm of constructing and reconstructing childhood to the study of street children lies precisely in the priority it gives to the understanding of childhood as a social construction. Significantly, James and Prout understand ethnography as a methodology to study childhood and not children (Prout et al. 1997: 8-9). The priority of social constructionism, over ethnography, however, leads to approaches that seek to study how street children are represented. That is certainly a vital subject, about which a lot more is still to be found out, but it should not be confused with the study of street children proper. An ethnography of street children would tell us how these young people themselves see the world, what they do, and how they feel.2

Let me elaborate the shortcomings of the critical street children studies by dissecting the ontological assumptions of writings such as Glauser ([1990] 1997), Boyden (1991, [1990] 1997), Ennew (1994a and b), Aptekar et al. (1997), Schep-Hughes and Hoffman (1994, 1998), Nieuwenhuiys (1999), and myself (Gigengack 1994). All these authors begin from a deconstructionist perspective, in which childhood is seen as a model, an invention, and even an export article. Childhood is thus not thought of as primarily what children live through or what happens to them. The kernel of their critique is that the very idea of street children is a construct of dominant society - a ‘wrong image’ - and that therefore it ought to be rejected. While that argument is certainly a first step in recognising complexity, it nonetheless comprises a series of beliefs about the reality of street children, which do not withstand scrutiny.

A first ontological assumption upon which this critical discourse rests is that the boundaries between street children and other urban poor are irrelevant. Critical authors thus note that distinctions such as that between the children ‘on’ and ‘of’ the street function as conceptual containers and that they serve institutional interests. Typically, the deconstruction exercise is limited to discursively erasing the boundaries between the two categories but in doing so it tends to trivialise the objective differences between street and working children.
in terms of family situation, economic behaviour, and cultural characteristics such as appearance, speech and drug use. Connelly and Ennew (1996b), for example, propose the term ‘children out of place’. Not only do they thus reduce street and working children to a metaphorical dimension of moral space, they also insist in lumping together widely divergent lifestyles. Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman (1998: 358) radicalise the same idea even further - ‘street children are simply poor children in the wrong place’ - , practically invalidating any consciousness of difference within street children and other urban poor.

Such deconstruction exercises are doomed to fail. The label street children cannot be dodged simply because hitherto the term has been monopolised by the users of institutional discourse. That position would treat institutional discourse merely as a language game, or a group of signs, and not ‘as practices that systematically form the object of which they speak’ (Foucault 1972: 49). Along with the activist critique, one can take street children as a ‘fiction’ – but if everyone believes in it, a fiction can become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1996). If institutions such as schools, shelters, reformatories, and hospitals separate ‘street children’ from the rest, if ordinary citizens such as neighbourhood residents treat ‘street children’ as such, and if even the ‘street children’ talk about themselves as if they were ‘street children’, it becomes very difficult to separate the fiction and the real street children.

The second ontological assumption is that of hegemony. If street children are but a fiction, then it follows that representations of street children are the products of a dominant ideology. Some texts depart from an implicit notion of false consciousness, as can be seen in their use of key terms such as ‘myths’, ‘stereotypes’ and ‘wrong images’ (see, for example, Ennew 1994a: 13,123,175; 1994b: 409). Freire (1988) and Glauser (1997) have been more explicit. These authors resort to what Scott (1990: 72) would call respectively a ‘thick’ and a ‘thin’ theory of hegemony. Freire holds that working children may behave towards street children ‘exactly like certain segments of the bourgeoisie’, even though there are ‘no substantial differences’ between working and street children, and, he argues, it is through false consciousness that working children ‘reproduce bourgeois ideology’ (1988: 15). Glauser is more cautious. He subscribes to a thin thesis of hegemony, according to which ‘those with social power ... define the reality of others by shaping and constraining the ways in which it is possible to talk and think [about street children]’ (Glauser 1997: 151).
If the powerful determine how the others talk and think, they do so in a limited number of ways: a third ontological assumption of activist critique is that the representations of street children are not only false, but also univocal. A distinction between deviant and romantic stereotypes is common, but some authors assume that the dominant, Western model of childhood generates one monolithic ‘popular opinion’ about street and working children (Aptekar et al. 1997: 478). However, although such wrong images and stereotypes are the object of critique, the condemned representations of street children are seldom localised in a context.  

These three assumptions are highly problematic. If critical discourse assumes that the boundaries between street children and other urban poor are irrelevant, it is badly equipped to describe and interpret the formation and the management of these boundaries. The assumption of hegemony limits taking the popular representations of street children as an ambivalent and contradictory space and, depending upon the context, the other urban poor may identify as well as disidentify with street children, sometimes even simultaneously. Such complexities do not fit, however, with univocal representations unbound to context. An even bigger problem is the possibility that the young street people in fact see themselves as street children, a possibility which the activist critique can only interpret through an inherently circular argument of internalization.

A main difficulty for critical activists is how to problematise the ongoing destruction of street children. My own work, for example, was initially in line with the critical street children discourse. I could thus ‘deconstruct’ street children by discussing for whom and why these young people constituted a problem. The list was long and I concluded that ‘while the problem for the children is survival, the [street] children themselves are the difficulty for the adults’ (Gigengack 1994: 382). That conclusion overlooked the fact that self-destructive behaviour was as much of a problem for street children as was their survival. Moreover, I also failed to address the question of whether street children were actually enough of a problem (see also De Swaan 1992). Had I asked when and for whom street children did not form a problem, my attention would have focused on social indifference, the sort of social exclusion that is not named as such. It would also have guided my attention to street children’s destructiveness, their feelings of alienation, and ultimately their own indifference to survival. Had I inverted the central question of my article, I would certainly have concluded that it is a problem when street children are not defined as a problem.
Against those who believe that, due to a methodological suspension of judgement combined with the posturing of cultural relativism, street people have tended to be romanticised (Kamiya 1995), I would argue the opposite: romanticism is only possible through the lack of fieldwork. The problem of most critical discourse about street children is not its ethnographic approach but rather its often shallow empirical foundation. My 1994 article posed the one question and not the other because it was based on only 18 months or so of fieldwork. In retrospect, then, I was able to overlook street children’s devastating, self-destructive capacities because of two reasons: first, the paradigmatic dominance of the activist critique in the literature, and second, my own relatively brief exposure to street children.

In this section, I have argued that the aims and assumptions of critical discourse may be at odds with the ethnographic project, and as a second statement I would suggest that street ethnography should be cautious in formulating an activist critique.

Street ethnography versus ‘street childrenism’
I have reduced the proliferation of discourses on street children to two types: that of the institutional experts and that of the critical activists. Very roughly, it can be said that the former engage in the pitification of street children and the latter in their prettification. Both do so for the sake of helping street children, by either promoting some intervention programme or shattering some stereotype. From a street-ethnographic perspective, however, the institutional and activist discourses are part and parcel of the practices under study, and as such they should be documented and studied.

In this respect I find the term ‘street childrenism’ instructive to understand the dynamics of thinking about street children. The neologism indicates that in the institutional and the activist discourses the idea of street children is primarily used as a tool to bring about change. The institutional experts and the critical activists share ‘street childrenism’ in that both accept the idea of street children as a rhetorical means for action. Their discourses should not, however, be confused with ethnography. From the perspective of the latter, the idea of street children is basically an end in itself, serving purposes of description, interpretation and diagnosis.

The term ‘street childrenism’ should not be taken as a negative value judgement. On the contrary, it rehabilitates the experts and activists. Experts and activists do not compete in social science arenas, as they have better things to do, and measuring their discourses solely against the yardstick of social science would be not only unfair, but
also senseless, since ethnography does not make a truth claim. Institutional expertise and critical activism may appear problematic to social scientists, but they accord with the experiences and expectations of those who make these discourses and believe in them.

The discovery of street childrenism clears the way, then, for street ethnography. In both the institutional and the activist discourses, there is little room for the exploration of how young street people live and what they find meaningful since, in both discourses, street children are perceived primarily through the categories of their beholders. More adequate representations of the reality of street children’s lives are therefore urgently needed and, as a third statement, I would suggest then that street ethnography tells true-to-life stories based on intensive and longitudinal fieldwork. With ‘true-to-life’ ethnography I mean that it strives for congruence with the reality of street children’s everyday experiences. A first prerequisite for this is a ‘feel’ for what that reality consists of, an implicit knowledge of what it is that street children do, how they live and die. That knowledge can only be obtained through intensive work with young street people on a long-term basis. Detailed empirical descriptions are another requirement for reality congruence. Street ethnography is based on evidence. By contrast, in street childrenism, detailed descriptions of street children’s lives and deaths are often hard to find.

Descriptions alone are not enough, however. Street ethnography is social science; it should have a vision. Even if the distinction between science and non-science is notorious, I would suggest that street ethnography meet criteria for social science, such as those formulated by the Dutch sociologist Goudsblom (1977). My fourth statement is then street ethnography must fulfil the requirements of precision, systematics, scope and relevance. These criteria help further clarify the differences between street childrenism and street ethnography.

Both institutional expertise and critical activism are typically imprecise and unsystematic. For example, institutional sources mostly agree that ‘[a]s a way to describe these children, ‘the street’ is perhaps as woolly as its stones are hard’ (Agnelli 1986: 32), without taking into account the implications of it. As a result, the meanings of their categories of street children may shift in arbitrary and often implicit ways (and hence the confusion about the number of street children). While critical authors such as Ennew (1994a) and (1994b), Nieuwenhuys (1999), and Panter-Brick (2002) acknowledge this problem there has been no systematic attempt to formulate an alternative.
Scope, or diagnostic potential, is, however, the biggest problem of street childrenism. The pitification inherent in institutional expertise and the prettification characteristic of the activist critique mystify the relational dimensions of street children’s lives. It is, after all, through the social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that the young street people are, and remain, the street children that they are. The underlying problem is that in both types of discourse the essentialism and the schematic generalisations run counter to thinking of street children as engaged in ongoing social relations.

Let me illustrate this difference in approach by briefly addressing what is probably the most recurrent issue in the street children studies, namely the definition of the term. Institutional authors usually attempt to define and refine the term ‘street children’, and critical scholars typically try to debunk its use value. Both of these formulas are not processual, however, in that they do not seek to determine who defines street children, in which context, and why. In street ethnography this becomes core: the definition of street children is at stake within the object itself (cf. Bourdieu 1992: 244).

Meeting the requirement of relevance may seem to be less of a problem for a field of study so characterised by human suffering. The fact that institutional and activist texts tend to shift gears quickly to ask how the ‘problem’ of street children can be solved or street children can be ‘empowered’ certainly adds to the appearance of it. But relevance cannot be assumed to be clear and unequivocal. Indeed, I would argue that essentialist generalisations may reduce relevance as much as they restrict scope due to two fallacies. The first, the fallacy of misplaced concreteness (Whitehead 1997 [1925]: 51), leads to such ideas that ‘the street child’ is ‘contaminated’ by a pathogenic entity called ‘the street’, or conversely that there are context-free ‘wrong images’ causing a good deal of harm. It is through such reification or ‘the attribution of concreteness’ (Bateson 1958: 263) that the institutional and activist habits of thought restrict their scope.

The relevance of these same discourses, however, is reduced by the opposite error: the ‘fallacy of misplaced abstractness’ (Peacock 2001: xv, 24). As already pointed out, the institutional rhetoric of the very large numbers makes the individual stories of concrete street children obsolete, and the same can be said about the abstract factors that ‘cause’ the phenomenon – for example, the so-called marginalisation cycle that explains how poor children degenerate into street children. Critical activists commit the same mistake whenever they conceptualise street children merely as an abstract ‘social construct’. While the label for street children is an abstraction, for the young
Street ethnography is political

‘Ethnographic presentations of social marginalization are almost guaranteed to be misread by the general public through a conservative, unforgiving lens’, Philippe Bourgois (1996: 15) observes in his study of Puerto-Rican drug dealers in New York. He argues that the politics of representation has seriously limited the ability of intellectuals to debate issues of poverty and alienation. The parallels with the study of street children are striking. Documenting self-destructive agency and analysing it as a central feature of street children’s lives and deaths evokes resistance, as I have learned. One reader, for example, agreed that most street children research had avoided discussing self-destruction but, nevertheless, suggested that emphasising it would bring an ethical dilemma. She could have argued the opposite as well, since evading a social problem potentially fosters indifference.

From an ethnographic point of view, it is also unacceptable only to latch on to positive representations of street children that the street children themselves know to be completely unrealistic. Elsewhere I argue that the trivialization of the destruction in street children’s lives constitutes a symbolic assault on their world (Gigengack 2006a: 344-56). The deeper reason for this lies in what Bauman (1992: 115-19) so aptly terms ‘legislative reason’. The role of intellectuals as legislators is one of ‘desperately seeking structure’; their quest is for beauty, purity and order – and these are not precisely the graces of the world of young street people (ibid.: xi). The latter know, of course, that their world is ugly, impure and disorderly, and so do the other urban poor around them. But their lay interpretations of reality are not authoritative. Legislative reason presumes to invalidate common sense (ibid.: 120), and, in the end, it may even deny what the world of young street people is all about.

It has also been suggested to me that criticizing activist/critical discourse would imply a regression to a-political positivism. I don’t think so. Good research with street children is a political project, first of all because it exposes the wretched conditions in which the young street people live and die. One implication of this is that ethnography with street children is sensorial – for, especially in the context of street life, the senses are concrete and political. If they come to their senses – and don’t lose their heads in discourses – street children researchers
will be able to perceive the materiality of their subjects, as expressed in for example street children’s bodily appearances and body odours (Gigengack 2006b).

Street ethnography is political also in the sense that stories about young street people and their self-destruction may motivate people somewhere in the world to improve the living conditions of those whom they see as street children. It must as well be pointed out that street ethnography is political in the field, too. Working with young street people unavoidably involves intervention and activism. That is notably so for humanitarian reasons, but it also has a methodological rationale (Gigengack 2006a). Street children exist in relation to institutional intervention and street child activism, and these practices can only be known through participant observation.

In sum, street ethnography is political because it studies social suffering. That characteristic further differentiates the street-ethnographic vision from the activist critique, and also of course from the a-political stance typically adopted in institutional discourse. Street ethnography is not about the political games that street educators, non-governmental charities, and Children’s Rights activists like to play. While street children researchers must recognise that they do not work within a political vacuum – that their writings may have intended as well as unanticipated political consequences, and that they themselves may engage in activism – this does not mean confusing the discourse of street child activism with that of ethnography. In the politics of representation, the commitment of street ethnography lies with the key objectives of description, interpretation, and diagnosis. These reflections bring me to the fifth and last statement: the street-ethnographic vision is thoroughly but indirectly political.

**Conclusion: agency fused with victimhood**

Institutional experts, critical activists, and social scientists have done a lot of work. Yet they have fallen prey, like initially I have done myself, to the two main types of discourses on street children: the institutional and the activist/critical. These two discourses block our view on how young street people live and die in specific places at specific times.

In particular, the literature consistently overlooks the paradoxes of young street people’s self-destructive agency. The institutional writings typically assume that street children are passive victims of miserable circumstances and therefore ‘fall into drugs’. The critical/activist
writings, in contrast, portray strong and sturdy street children who do not engage at all in the self-destruction that is common among street children. These omissions are critical, because the street children themselves may see their self-destructive agency as fundamental to their world and to the problems they encounter. If it is based on intensive and longitudinal fieldwork, good street ethnography will be able to show that, beyond all the coping with poverty, being a street child involves self-destruction. The young street people’s victimhood and their agency will thus appear to be two sides of the same coin.

Acknowledgement

Jojada Verrips scrutinized the text innumerable times, and always urged me to clarify my thoughts. I coined the concept ‘street childrenism’ together with Raquel Alonso. I also wish to thank the editors for their thoughtful comments.

Notes

1. The discursive logic of the activist critique is thus actually a bureaucratic derivative too, for in order to be ‘critical’ the activist thinkers need the institutional discourse of the experts.
2. Thomas (1989: 47-8) makes a similar argument with regards to the history of childhood versus the history of children.
3. Catchy phrases such as the following are unclear about who stereotypes street children and why: ‘Street children are often referred to as “vagrant,” a term implying a random, purposeless wandering, attributed to individual failure’ (Felsman 1989: 67, italics mine). ‘For many people the street child is the embodiment of the untamed feral child; an outcast whose very existence threatens social chaos and decline’ (Boyden 1997: 196, italics mine). ‘Most people see [tunnel kids] as simply another gang of doped-up, violent, homeless children’ (Taylor et al. 2001: xvi, italics mine).
4. Critical street children discourse is often also underpinned by an epistemological assumption regarding the observed and the observer. Glause’s influential article ([1990] 1997) provides again a good example, all the more so since its retrospective postscript acknowledges ‘a confident, almost omnipotent attitude’ driven by ‘an urge to contribute to concrete action’ (ibid.: 163). Thus, a key passage in the article claims that ‘those with social power ... define the reality of others’, whereas ‘deconstruction ... is necessary as a liberation from the influence and reach of unwanted power’ (ibid.: 151). The ultimate implication of this claim is that the others are the passive recipients of the hegemonic construct of street children, whilst their liberation lies in the article itself: the
epistemological assumption is that deconstructing street children is the privilege of intellectuals and not of the others.

References


